

## **“THE TEST—OR THE GIFT”**

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, February 14, 2016

Text: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus took **The Test**.

The Test came in the form of three challenges:

- Make bread without flour.
- Become Lord of all.
- Endanger yourself in Jerusalem.

Jesus said “No” each time.

Later, Jesus would say “Yes” to each of these challenges! He would make bread without ingredients. He would allow himself to be destroyed in Jerusalem so that he could be delivered dramatically. He would become lord of all.

But this time he passed The Test by saying “No.”

The Test was not a test of endurance. He had passed that test already by walking around in the wilderness forty days without food. But The Test was not a test of endurance.

The Test was not a test of virtue. He was not asked to do immoral things in a moment of weakness. The things he was asked to do were not intrinsically wrong. So it was not a test of virtue.

If it was not a test of endurance or a test of virtue, what was The Test trying to discern?

The Test Jesus took in the wilderness, like any test you and I might take from God, was a test of faith. The purpose of the test was to determine whether God is God to us when it is not obvious. One really good way to test faith is by checking whether people are always thankful to God, or only thankful when things are going “their way.” If we are only thankful when things are the way we want them to be, then God is not actually God to us—instead, we are god to ourselves. We love ourselves more than we love God, who is to be loved above all other things.

A god is that to which we look for everything good, the one from whom we expect all good things to come. The most elemental creed in the Bible is James 1:17: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” That confidence in God is the reason we thank and praise God. As Luther says in explaining the first article of the Creed: God has given us everything we have and are: therefore “we ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” That is how it ought to be. God is good to us; we praise and thank God. Good people give thanks to God for taking care of them. God blesses us; we bless God back.

But how about when life is not perfect? Do we continue to “thank and praise, serve and obey” the God who has given us everything, including life itself? That would be what you call “faithfulness” or “faith.”

I suppose the only way to know would be to take something away. That would test the permanence or faithfulness of our thanks. Do we thank God because we truly believe God is good, or only because we are happy? Is this all about God, or all about us? Do we think God exists to please us? Or do we live to please God?

The Test was given in its harshest form to a man named Job. As the book of Job opens, God is heard discussing with Satan how God’s most faithful servant on earth is also very wealthy. Satan wonders whether Job would be so godly a man if he didn’t have so much to be thankful for. Would he still bless the name of the Lord, if he had fewer blessings from God? As a test, all his blessings were stripped away, even his health. Yet, even though he got very confused, Job did not deny God even in the new “wilderness” to which he was subjected.

Adam and Eve were tested in opposite circumstances to Job. They were not in a wilderness but a garden, in which they had everything they could want. Yet even in their abundance they were not able to allow God to be God to them. They had to have that one extra thing. They wanted no limit to their choices. They wanted to be like God instead of serving God.

Jesus was given The Test in the wilderness where the Spirit had led him. “Wilderness” in either Hebrew or Greek is the “place where there is nothing.” He had three opportunities to deny God.

1. The first challenge: Is all you need right now a little bread?

Even in the best of circumstances it is hard for people to believe that the most important element of life is communion with God. It is much harder when life falls apart. People figure survival matters more than anything. That is how we act, in extreme danger. Let me take care of myself first—then I’ll see about anything else.

Jesus passed this challenge by answering the heart of it. Life is more than survival. One does not live by bread alone. Obedience to the devil would have meant losing fellowship with God and therefore a loss of life even and especially when it seemed necessary for survival.

2. The second challenge: Would you like to be in total control?

The answer is yes, obviously. Otherwise, why does so much of our conversation revolve around how irksome it is that other people just don’t get it? Of course, we would like our will to be done. We know what is best, don’t we?

Jesus met this challenge head on. Divinity belongs to God. And thanks belong to God. He saw that the devil wanted Jesus to be in his control by giving him everything. He wanted to “buy” Jesus: I’ll give you the kingdoms, and you will have me to thank, so bow down and worship me.

Jesus refused. Helpless as he was at the moment, he knew that he was better off a servant to God with nothing, than a servant to the devil with everything. Jesus got this one right.

3. A third time the devil tested Jesus' faithfulness to God. He twisted the meaning of the relationship with God, and asked if Jesus could accept it.

Because God is so good to us, the subtlest temptation is perhaps to allow God to be nothing more to us than our provider and protector, as though he works for us. As though what God does for us is not grace but necessity. "You created me, God; so you have to take care of me."

To make God into our servant is just another way of not allowing God to be God to us. Jesus refused, and he got this one right.

The Test is not complicated. Simply love God more than you care about anything else!

But it is impossible for us to pass. We cannot make ourselves love the Lord our God with our whole heart, soul, and mind. The Test reveals that about us. Just as The Test revealed the glory of God in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, the same test exposes our failures.

So, Jesus passed the test. But what does that mean for us except that he is better than we are? Where do we go from here? This is where it gets tricky.

If we think Jesus took the test in order to show us how to pass it, or to impress upon us how hard it is, then Jesus is not our Savior—he is our problem. Some people who are very good at meeting challenges will probably rise to the task and make a good show of trusting God when everything is taken away. We will admire them, confer sainthood on them, and muddle along.

But Jesus suffered the test, as he suffered everything else, not in order to give us a test but to give us a gift. A gift. The gift was that he himself, by suffering all this for people who do not pass the test, gave us a reason to love God which surpasses all other reasons. He did that, so that we would love God like nobody else. Not by being very virtuous for God or suffering for God, but by accepting the Gift of his Son, the gift of life in his family, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of a peace and joy which begin now and cannot be taken away.

We get tested, yes. We suffer, yes. But in our trials, our strength is not the example of Jesus but the gift he gave us. He left ninety-nine sheep to come and get us. He came out to the highways and byways and insisted we come to the banquet he had prepared, for which the better people were not worthy. He made friends with people like you and me, when better people were available.

That is The Gift. Do not make the mistake of living to the Test. You are not Jesus. Live instead from The Gift, and (surprise surprise) according to Jesus you will always be fine. He's the one who made bread enough for everyone, remember, and who was rescued dramatically at Jerusalem and given authority over all things. We can take him at his Word. We'll be fine.

Amen.